Promoting Academic Integrity: Utilizing Code of Conduct Statements with Students in an Online Course during the Pandemic

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Abstract

Academic integrity is a fundamental principle that underpins the educational process, fostering a culture of trust, fairness, and ethical behavior in academic settings. It is crucial for universities to address these factors that influence cheating and create an environment that promotes academic integrity. This study explored an active approach to communicating the expectations of academic integrity in a virtual classroom. Participants in this study were enrolled in large sections of Introduction to Psychology courses at a midsize Canadian university. Observed grade inflation during the pandemic inspired the addition of a code of conduct statement to the course materials. The anticipated decrease in average exam scores after being exposed to the code of conduct did not occur. Findings indicate that having a code of conduct as a central document in an online setting is insufficient for inspiring academic honesty. We discuss reasons why this intervention was ineffective and provide recommendations for others wishing to use a code of conduct in an online course. We concluded, as have other researchers, that students' attitudes toward cheating and peer-based norms are paramount to a culture of academic integrity.

Keywords: academic integrity, cheating, honor codes, peer attitudes, online assessment, Covid-19

1. Introduction

Academic integrity is a fundamental principle that underpins the educational process, fostering a culture of trust, fairness, and ethical behavior in academic settings. A central characteristic of learning is integrity. Upholding academic integrity ensures that students acquire knowledge through honest and genuine efforts, while allowing educators to accurately assess their progress and aptitude. As educators, it is our responsibility to cultivate a learning environment that promotes integrity and discourages academic misconduct. We are charged with creating this climate in our classrooms and at our institutions. However, upon taking up that challenge, there are many things to confront and consider.

There is no shortage of research about academic integrity. Further, it is not a new issue in education. In 1964, what is now a seminal study in exploring cheating in higher education was published by Bowers. This study was sobering as it was the first large-scale study of its kind and shone a light on the depth and prevalence of cheating that was gleaned from survey data collected from over 5000 students at 99 institutions of higher education (Bowers, 1964). McCabe and Trevino (1997) replicated Bowers' study 30 years later with similar findings regarding cheating in general; however, they added to the understanding of the phenomenon in their findings regarding other meaningful differences relative to explicit forms of cheating on exams as well as findings regarding specific groups who cheated and how students cheat on written assignments. Additionally, McCabe and Trevino (1993) further advanced the understanding of the prevalence of cheating with their survey of over 6,000 undergraduate students enrolled at 31 colleges. In their study, they found that close to 75% of the students who they surveyed indicated that during their time in higher education they engaged in some form of academic dishonesty (McCabe and Trevino, 1993). Additional research speaks not only to the prevalence of academic dishonestly, but also to the repetitive nature of cheating as reported by students indicating that repeat cheating is common and engaged in over time and place – as in during all the years of and in multiple courses taken during a student's undergraduate education (Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce, 1996; McCabe & Trevino, 1995; Moffatt, 1990).

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Academic dishonesty refers to any form of unethical or dishonest behavior that compromises the integrity of the learning process and undermines the principles of academic achievement. Unfortunately, as noted, the literature indicates that the prevalence of cheating is quite high with most students indicating that at some point during their education they have engaged in cheating (Malesky et al., 2022). In fact, McCabe and the International Center for Academic Integrity [ICAI] (2020) report numbers nearing 70% for rates of cheating as discovered in some studies. Academic dishonesty encompasses a range of actions, including but not limited to plagiarism, cheating on exams, fabricating data or sources, unauthorized collaboration, and submitting work done by others as one's own. Academic dishonesty presents a variety of issues for academic institutions and for society. In addition to defining the concept as a multi-faceted phenomenon in higher education, there is no shortage of literature outlining how honest students, the institution, and employers are disadvantaged by students who cheat to achieve grades and credentials. For example, some of the impacts of cheating are students receiving credentials they did not earn and thus while credentialed do not have the requisite skills associated with the credential. Further, there is a risk of continued unethical behavior post-graduation, which can be especially problematic in some professions (e.g., law, education, mental health care). Additionally, cheating on the part of some students disadvantages peers who do not cheat as scholarships and admission to graduate and professional programs become more and more competitive (Malesky et al.,2022).

1.1 Who Cheats and Why?

In addition to studies of prevalence and effects of cheating, other researchers subsequently have added valuable information about the profile of who cheats (e.g., gender, personality, self-esteem) and why with regard to contextual factors (e.g., year in school, GPA) (Bowers, 1964; Davis et al., 1992; Eisenberger & Shank, 1985; Lee et al., 2020; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; McCabe et al., 2001a; Perry et al., 1990; Ward & Beck, 1990). Understanding who cheats and what circumstances or contexts might encourage cheating is an important part of understanding how to best intervene with students. Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2002) approach this within the basic premise that students cheat to get a higher mark while acknowledging that while pragmatic this is an oversimplification of understanding who cheats and why. They have published a compendium of sorts to help educators understand academic dishonesty while also promoting consideration of how to prevent, detect, and confront the issue as supported by theoretical models and meaningful application of interventions.

The literature indicates that there are numerous reasons why university students may engage in academic dishonesty ranging from parental pressure to poor time management. Students may find themselves overwhelmed with coursework, assignments, and other responsibilities, leading to a sense of being overburdened and resorting to shortcuts to complete their work. Procrastination and poor planning can contribute to a last-minute rush, making students more susceptible to engaging in dishonest practices (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel,2002).

It is important to note that not all students engage in academically dishonest behaviors, but those who do report a wide range of motivations and reasons. One key factor that surfaces repeatedly in studies is the pressure to succeed academically; many students face immense competition and high expectations, both from themselves and from external sources such as parents, peers, or future employers (McCabe et al., 2012; Tatum et al., 2018; Yikealo et al., 2018). This pressure can lead to a fear of failure and a desire for higher grades, pushing some students to resort to dishonest practices to achieve academic success (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002). Murdock and Anderman (2006) have proposed a framework for understanding why students cheat based on motivation that is comprised of three factors: goals, expectations, and cost. Other researchers have focused on reasons ranging from moral reasoning to a lack of consequences for academically dishonest behavior (Bertram Gallant, 2008; Olafson et al., 2013). Also, some students may lack a clear understanding of academic integrity and either do not understand or do not observe the consequences of academic dishonesty. They may not fully grasp the importance of originality, citation, and ethical research practices. This lack of awareness, coupled with a focus on immediate rewards, can lead to engaging in dishonest behavior without fully comprehending the implications.

In McCabe and Trevino's (1993) large scale study of 6,096 students from 31 schools, several institution-level variables were studied. Interestingly, in this study peer behavior proved to be the most significant contextual variable for why students cheat. They concluded that in line with Bandura's social learning theory, observation of peers' cheating may normalize cheating behavior as well as motivate cheating on the part of formerly non-cheating students who start cheating in an effort not to be disadvantaged by peers making higher grades (Bandura, 1986; McCabe & Trevino, 1993).

1.2 Why We Should Care About Academic Dishonesty:

It is crucial for universities to address these factors that influence cheating and create an environment that promotes academic integrity.

This can be achieved through education and awareness programs, emphasizing the importance of ethical conduct, providing resources for time management and study skills, and fostering a supportive learning environment that values learning over grades. Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2002) provide us with a list of reasons why we, as educators, should care about academic integrity. Specifically, they note the following reasons: 1) **equity** as it relates to students grades being assigned fairly and on the basis of authentic work; 2) **character development** as it relates to the mission of the university; 3) **the mission to transfer knowledge** in a way that is true to the goal of an education as it certifies expertise and pushes personal development; 4) **student morale** and how this can be negatively impacted by students observing peers cheating with no consequences thus leading to cynicism about their education and possible cheating behaviors in an effort to keep up with dishonest peers; 5) **faculty morale** as it is impacted when instructors discover cheating and take it personally, which can lead to frustration, anger, and cynicism in the classroom and on campus; 6) **students' future behavior** as it relates to the relationship between cheating in university and cheating in graduate or professional school or in the work environment; 7) **reputation of the institution** and how it can be negatively impacted by frequent association with publicized rumors or scandals having to do with cheating; 8) **public confidence in higher education** as illustrated by a mistrust of academia on the part of the public as facilitated by students' experiences of cheating or observing cheating and as impacted by employers who find a credentialed graduate to be deficient in skills (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002).

1.3 Code of Conduct Statements

One option that is frequently discussed in the literature to address academic integrity in higher education is the use of code of conduct or honor Statements. The use of code of conduct statements in higher education institutions has a rich history that spans several decades (Canning, 1956). These statements have evolved to become an integral part of academic policies and practices, serving as guiding principles for students, faculty, and staff. The origins of code of conduct statements can be traced back to the early 20th century when universities recognized the need to establish guidelines to govern student behavior and uphold academic standards. Initially, these codes primarily focused on disciplinary matters, outlining rules and regulations related to student conduct and behavior on campus. However, as institutions of higher education began to prioritize academic integrity and ethical behavior, code of conduct statements expanded to encompass broader principles and expectations. These statements now address not only student conduct but also academic honesty, plagiarism, research ethics, and the responsible use of resources. While rates of cheating are typically lower at institutions with honor codes, this is not always the case, nor do codes of conduct or honor codes eliminate academic dishonesty (Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce, 1996; McCabe et al., 2001; Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002). However, there is no shortage of research studies regarding the use of codes of conduct, types of codes of conduct, and the effectiveness of codes of conduct. Honor code research has been carried out examining attitudes toward cheating before and after establishing an honor code (Roig & Marks, 2006), how honor codes affect perceptions of peers' cheating (Arnold, et al., 2007; Pauli et al., 2014), how cheating behavior relates to an honor code, personality, and peer influence (Malesky et al., 2022), how students perceive and respond when confronted with academic dishonesty in relation to other institutional variables (Tatum et al., 2018), comparison of traditional and modified honor codes (McCabe et al., 2002), and evaluating cheating in relation to moral, social, and economic incentives in conjunction with the presence or absence of an honor code (O'Neill & Pfeiffer, 2012).

Honor codes can be presented to students at the institutional level or in the classroom with varying levels of effectiveness. Codes are intended to place the responsibility for academic integrity onto the individual students while also impacting the culture and norms surrounding cheating. And while codes of conduct and honor statements can be effective, there are factors that can make them more effective or less effective. One predominant finding in the literature on codes of conduct is that unless an honor code is made part of the culture of the institution, it is less likely to bring about the desired effect of decreasing academic dishonesty; furthermore, administration, faculty, staff, and especially students need to perceive that the normative culture of the institution is one that supports academic integrity and actively disapproves of academic dishonesty (Bowers, 1964; Malesky et al., 2022; McCabe & Trevino, 1993, 1997; McCabe et al., 1999, 2001b; O'Neill & Pfeiffer, 2012; Roig & Marks, 2006; Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002).These findings support the idea of the role of social learning theory in a student's decision to cheat or not to cheat as behaviors are often the result of learning that occurs through interaction between individuals and the subsequent modeling of behaviors learned through those interactions (Akers, 2009; Stogner et al., 2013). Relatedly, students who, through social learning, believe that others disapprove of cheating are more likely to experience or fear feelings of shame associated with cheating thus decreasing the chances of engaging in cheating (O'Neill & Pfeiffer, 2012). In summary, code of conduct statements in higher education, when used properly, may serve as a foundation for fostering a culture of integrity, providing a

framework for maintaining academic standards and promoting ethical behavior among all members of the academic community, but the impact is still limited.

1.4 Online Education, Pandemic Factors, and Cheating

Technological advancements and online learning have both shifted the culture of higher education and played a significant role in shaping how colleges and universities address academic dishonesty. Online learning platforms and digital tools have prompted institutions to address issues related to online conduct, plagiarism detection, and the responsible use of technology in academic settings (Watson & Sottile, 2010).Thus, when considering academic integrity and codes of conduct, it is important to place this within the context of how the use of technology has rapidly increased since the early 2000s; higher education and the modern classroom have undergone dramatic changes. Numerous studies of online education indicate that this approach has brought about significant changes in the landscape of higher education while offering numerous advantages such as flexibility and accessibility; however, it has also given rise to new challenges, one of the most prominent being the increased opportunity and incidence of cheating (Best & Shelley, 2018: Bettinger et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2010; Krienert et al., 2022; Lederman, 2020; Watson & Sottile, 2010). This downside of online education poses a serious threat to the integrity and quality of higher education, and there is a commonly held belief among educators that academic dishonesty is more prevalent in online courses (Mellar et al., 2018).

Online education can facilitate and amplify cheating in higher education for a variety of reasons. Research has examined factors such as the anonymity of the virtual environment, the ease of accessing unauthorized resources, and the limited invigilation capabilities in online assessments (Arnold, 2022; Krienert, et al., 2022). When reflecting on the literature that has established that norms and social learning theory play an important role in whether students choose to cheat, it is relevant that the online setting allows students to remain largely anonymous, reducing the fear of being caught in the act of cheating. This anonymity can embolden students to engage in unethical behaviors, such as sharing answers during exams or purchasing pre-written essays, as the risk of detection appears minimal. As a result, instructors face a formidable challenge in monitoring and preventing these instances of academic misconduct. The digital nature of online education enables students to easily access a wide variety of unauthorized resources. With the internet at their fingertips, learners can quickly search for answers or contact others during assessments. As noted by Watson and Sottile (2010), "Students today are now part of the 'copy and paste' generation in which dishonest behavior is only a mouse click away" (Watson & Sottile, 2010, para.6). Instructors often find themselves engaged in a constant battle to identify and counteract the various ways in which students exploit digital resources to gain an unfair advantage. In this online learning era, the responsibility of educators extends beyond imparting knowledge to actively curbing these forms of academic dishonesty to ensure the quality and credibility of higher education.

While there are substantial differences in how online courses are planned by instructors and approached by students under normal circumstances as compared to when taken upon as an emergency response as was the case with the COVID-19 pandemic, this does not preclude literature on online learning maintaining relevance (Engelhardt et al. 2022). However, it is important to acknowledge how the pandemic played a role in a nearly hyper-speed advancement of the use of technology in higher education starting in the spring of 2020 and how this may have led to a unique type of online experience. While the use of technology in higher education and online courses have been on the rise for decades, the pandemic forced an almost overnight shift for institutions, educators, and students to distance education as the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid and widespread transition to online education as a means of ensuring the safety of students and educators. While this shift was a critical response to the crisis, it brought about unforeseen challenges (Arnold, 2022; Engelhardt et al., 2022). The abrupt shift to online education in response to the pandemic left both students and educators facing uncharted territory. The sudden change disrupted established teaching methods and assessment strategies. Many students found themselves grappling with the unfamiliarity of online exams and assignments, creating an environment where the temptation to engage in cheating, whether through collaboration with peers or the use of external resources, became more enticing. The lack of in-person invigilation and the novelty of online assessment tools presented new opportunities for academic dishonesty, often driven by students' desperation to adapt to a rapidly evolving educational landscape (Bilen & Matros, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing shift to online education have presented a complex set of circumstances that have, in some cases, fostered an increase in cheating in higher education. Bilen and Matros (2021) have indicated findings of a dramatic increase in cheating because of online assessment necessitated by the move to online education following Covid in Spring of 2020. Factors such as the abrupt nature of the transition, limitations of online proctoring, changes in socialization and peer contact, and the psychological impact on students have all contributed to this concerning trend. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, it is

imperative for institutions to adapt their strategies to maintain academic integrity while also recognizing and addressing the unique challenges posed by the pandemic and the return to both in-person and online education post-pandemic.

2. The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore an active approach to effectively communicating and reinforcing the expectations of academic integrity while fostering a shared understanding of the importance of academic integrity among students in a virtual classroom. We aimed to gain insight into the effectiveness of this strategy in promoting academic integrity among students in an online course. Our main hypothesis was that signing a code of conduct and repeated exposure to expectations regarding academic honesty would have an impact on exam scores by creating expectations and a normative culture of academic honesty in an online course. Specifically, we expected a slight increase in exam performance for students between their Fall 2018 and Winter 2019 semesters due to maturation effects; these courses were taught in-person with proctored exams and served as comparison groups. When comparing Fall 2020 and Winter 2021 online courses of students who took un-proctored exams, we expected scores to be high for the Fall 2020 group prior to emphasis on the code of conduct but lower for the Winter 2021 class following exposure and emphasis on a code of conduct explicitly addressing academic integrity regarding taking exams. We expected scores in both online courses to be higher than the comparison group of Fall 2018/Winter 2019. If the code of conduct (the "intervention") had the expected effect of reducing cheating, then the Winter 2021 performance would be lower than Fall 2020 performance (where cheating was believed to be widespread), even though it may still be higher than the Winter 2019 performance due to students still having the capacity to cheat, even though they had been exposed to the code of conduct.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants in this study were students enrolled in large sections of Introduction to Psychology courses at a midsize Canadian university in southwestern Ontario. The courses are a two-part series of introductory courses required for all psychology majors at this university. The courses are Introduction to Psychology as a Behavioral Science (PSYC 1150) and Introduction to Psychology as a Social Science (PSYC 1160). The students in these courses were all psychology majors as the courses used in this study are restricted to majors only, and they were all taught by the principal investigator. This study did not involve active participation from the students. Instead, the study was based on the students' marks on the midterm and final exams. Specifically, the scores used for this study were collected from these populations who were in three different conditions regarding exposure to and emphasis on the code of conduct statement. Further, the data were analyzed after all the courses were completed and final grades had been turned in for all the students (See Table 1).

Table 1
Code of conduct exposure and emphasis conditions

Course	Condition
FALL 2018- PSYC 1150	In-person, proctored exams, no code of conduct emphasis
WINTER 2019 – PSYC 1160	In-person, proctored exams, no code of conduct emphasis
FALL 2020 – PSYC 1150	Online, exams not proctored, no code of conduct emphasis
WINTER 2021 – PSYC 1160	Online, exams not proctored, code of conduct emphasis

The average midterm and final exam scores from these courses were used to compare an academic year (2018-2019) of psychology majors who were in-person and took proctored exams but had no emphasis on the Student Code of Conduct to a "matching" population of students in 2020-2021 who were online with exams that were not proctored. Additionally, Fall 2020 students had no emphasis on the Student Code of Conduct while the Winter 2021 students did experience emphasis on the Student Code of Conduct. Thus, scores were used from a full in-person year with proctored exams and no Student Code of Conduct emphasis and compared to an online year that split into a) online, exams not proctored, no Student Code of Conduct emphasis and b) online, exams not proctored, with Student Code of Conduct emphasis. The two sets of students (2018-2019 and 2020-2021) were very similar – predominantly first-year psychology majors -- and all the courses in this study have the same curriculum and were taught by the same instructor who is also the principal investigator. Further, the students in each term of each year were mostly the same students since data were collected from the psychology majors-only

sections. New psychology majors typically take PSYC 1150 in the Fall and PSYC 1160 in the Winter, so there is a significant overlap in the enrollment. Specifically, there were 227 students in the Fall 2018 course and 240 students in the Winter 19 course; 72% of the students in Winter 2019 were also enrolled in Fall 2018. There were 335 students in the Fall 2020 course and 341 students in the Winter 2021 course; 79% of the students in Winter 2021 were also enrolled in Fall 2020.

3.2 Procedure

This study was conceptualized at the end of the Fall 2020 term upon observation of exceptionally high scores for the students on assessments and the overall course average in the PSYC 1150 online course taught by the PI. Additionally, the study was inspired by conversations with other professors and observations of grade inflation in other courses that were also online due to the pandemic. This study received clearance from the Research Ethics Board at the university where it was conducted (REB Number 43190; Research Project Title REB # 23-144). At the beginning of the Winter 2021 term, in addition to the Academic Misconduct information that is required to be provided to all students by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, the Student Code of Conduct statement for the university was posted online on the PSYC 1160 course website for all the students to see (see Appendix A and Appendix B).During the first week of class, announcements were made on the course learning management system (LMS) directing the students to read and sign the Student Code of Conduct. The students were directed to a Qualtrics site to review the Student Code of Conduct, sign an Honor Statement, and submit it electronically (see Appendix C).

As the semester progressed the students were reminded to sign and abide by the code of conduct and of expectations of academic honesty with announcements on the course LMS; this occurred four times over the course of the semester. Announcements were also emailed to the students when posted. Prior to the midterm and the final exams, students were reminded of the expectation that they abide by the code of conduct with LMS announcements that were posted and emailed to them (see Appendix D). Further, a statement about student conduct was shown at the top of the first page for both the midterm and the final exam (see Appendix E). This decision to continually remind the students about the code of conduct was made based on prior research indicating that this increases their impact (McCabe & Trevino, 2002; Roig & Marks, 2006).

At the end of the Winter 2021 term, passive consent was sought from the PSYC 1160 class. An announcement seeking consent of use of student scores in aggregate form was posted in April after the final exam was given and marks were posted for the students (see Appendix F). This date was chosen so that students would know what all their marks were and what their course grade was going to be so that they would not feel that if they chose not to agree to the use of their data there would be any repercussions. No students contacted the professor/PI or GA to indicate that they did not want their data included in the study. Passive consent was sought specifically from the Winter 2021 section of PSYC 1160. There were 335 students in the Fall 2020 course and 341 students in the Winter 2021 course; 79% of the students in Winter 2021 were also enrolled in Fall 2020.

Separate consent was not sought from the students in Fall 2020 who did not overlap with the Winter 2021 population. Consent was not accessible from the students in Fall 2018, Winter 2019, Fall 2019, or Winter 2020 due to the timing and design of this study. The data (scores) were collected as part of the required course curriculum and were saved in archived course files that were accessible only to the instructor/PI. It was not feasible to go back and attempt to try to message these classes as groups nor was it feasible to try to contact all these individual students to obtain consent. There would have been more of a risk of breach of confidentiality to go back and try to find each individual student to make contact to ask about the use of their data because this would have required the PI to identify each person by name, student number, and email ID. Because we used aggregate data (average scores on the midterms and final exams), we pulled only the scores and deidentified all the data to get average scores used for comparison of the populations in this study as we did not need or use name, student ID, email ID, or any identifying information.

3.3 Data Analysis

Our strategy for addressing our research question was to rely primarily on mid-term and final exam scores. Course marks factor in other points that are not as prone to cheating behavior, such as written take-home assignments. We began by removing duplicate cases and examining the data for outliers. There were 17 scores that fell more than 2.5 standard deviations below the mean. We removed these outliers from analyses to ensure that results were reflective of the class participants as a whole. It may be significant to note that the data in this study were not normally distributed; however, the sample size was large enough to suggest that this is not likely concerning. Finally, we addressed the research question in two ways. First, we compared the Fall/Winter 2021/2022 cohort, where the code of conduct was discussed, to the Fall/Winter 2018/2019 cohort, which was the last cohort prior to the pandemic. Out of curiosity, we also included the Fall/Winter 2019/2020 cohort who

attended classes in-person for the majority of the year but were sent home for isolation at the end of the Winter semester, and therefore took the final exam online and unmonitored. Second, we isolated the Fall/Winter 2020/2021 cohort and compared those who signed the code of conduct to those who did not.

3.3.1   Secondary Analysis

This analysis focused on who signed and who did not sign the code of conduct statement to attempt to determine if signing the code of conduct as opposed to just exposure to the code of conduct impacted performance. This statement was put in Qualtrics online and the class was asked/told on more than one occasion to read and sign it in Winter 2021. Despite these efforts, not everyone signed the code of conduct, thus allowing us to compare those who signed to those who did not sign the code of conduct. We expected the "did not sign" group exam scores to stay high from Fall 2020 to Winter 2021, and we expected a decrease in performance from Fall 2020 to Winter 2021 for the "signed" group.
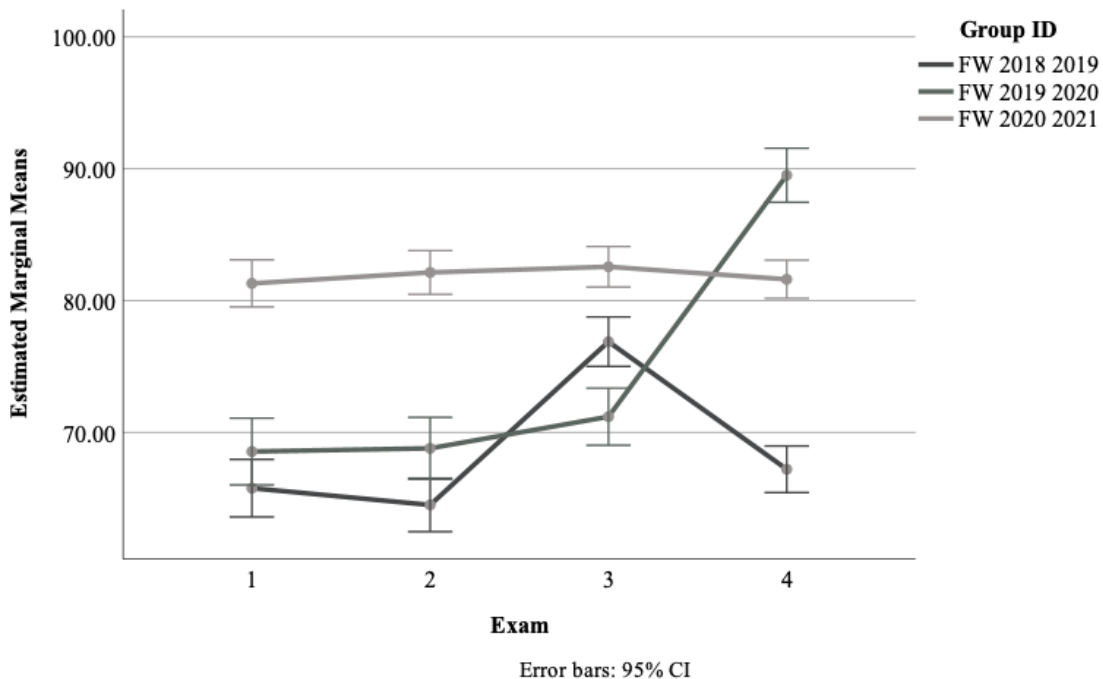
4.   Results

To test our hypotheses, we used a 3 (between subjects – Cohort) X 4 (within subjects – Exam Occasion) Analysis of Variance. Due to sufficient sample size and violation of the assumption of sphericity, we chose to interpret the multivariate tests for effects involving repeated measures. There was a significant main effect for cohort [$F_{(2, 548)}$ = 67.89, $p < .01$, partial ω^2 = .21] with each cohort mean exam scores differing significantly from one another [$M_{(2018-2019)}$=68.59; $M_{(2019-2020)}$=74.51; $M_{(2020-2021)}$=81.91]. There was also a significant effect for exam occasion [Λ=.582 $F_{(3, 546)}$=130.45, $p < .01$, Multivariate ω^2 = .41] and the interaction between cohort and exam occasion [Λ=.323 $F_{(6, 1092)}$=138.29, $p < .01$, Multivariate ω^2 = .67]. See Table 2 for descriptive statistics for each condition and Figure 1 for a visual representation.

Table 2 *Descriptive Statistics for Exams Used in Analyses*

	Fall Exams				Winter Exams				
	Midterm		Final		Midterm		Final		
Cohort (Fall-Winter)	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	N
2018-2019	65.77	16.76	64.50	15.55	76.88	14.31	67.21	14.87	170
2019-2020	68.55	15.88	68.80	13.67	71.19	12.59	89.51	7.38	127
2020-2021	81.30	11.93	82.14	11.75	82.57	10.94	81.61	11.12	254
Total	73.57	16.18	73.62	15.66	78.19	13.23	78.99	14.45	551

Figure 1 *Plot of Exam Scores by Cohort and Exam Occasion*

Error bars: 95% CI

Note: 1=Fall Mid-Term; 2=Fall Final Exam; 3=Winter Mid-Term; 4=Winter Final Exam.

The main effect for exam occasion is a result of Winter exams being significantly higher (across the three cohorts) than Fall exams. The interaction can be described as follows: for the 2020-2021 cohort, exam scores were consistently high across all four occasions with no perceptible drop in average scores during the winter (after introducing the students to the university's code of conduct). For the 2019-2020 cohort, exam scores are relatively stable until the Winter final exam, which corresponds to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and this exam was taken online. Finally, for the 2018-2019 cohort, exam scores were relatively stable with a spike in the Winter midterm. The anticipated decrease in average exam scores after being exposed to the code of conduct for the Winter 2021 semester did not occur.

To further explore the hypotheses pertaining to the code of conduct, we isolated the 2020-2021 cohort and compared scores for the midterm exam between those who signed the code of conduct (N=236) and those who did not (N=84) as well as the final exam (N=234 and N=82 respectively). Specifically, we used two independent samples t-tests to compare the two groups separately for the midterm exam and final exam. Presumably, those who signed the code of conduct would be more likely to refrain from or reduce cheating and would score lower on the winter exams compared to those who did not sign the code of conduct. There was no significant difference between the two midterm scores [$M_{(not\ signed)}$=80.46, $M_{(signed)}$=81.40, $t_{(318)}$=-0.645, $p > .05$, d=-.082] or between the two final exam scores [$M_{(not\ signed)}$=78.90, $M_{(signed)}$=80.43, $t_{(314)}$= -.995, $p > .05$, d=-.128]. These tests comparing exam scores between those who signed and did not sign the code of conduct did not support our hypothesis that signing the code of conduct would reduce cheating which would manifest in lower exam scores.

5. Discussion

Decades of research indicate that academic dishonesty is pervasive in higher education and due to the far-reaching negative effects this has on the integrity of the degrees awarded and the experience of education, academic integrity, while not a new topic, continues to be a pressing topic for students, instructors, and administrators (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002; Malesky et al., 2022). This study was an attempt to view this phenomenon through the lens of a sudden shift to online learning as a result of the pandemic with an eye toward the utility of code of conduct statements in this particular situation and in future online courses in higher education.

The results of this study, however, have perhaps given us more to think about than to conclude. This study has supported several principles and concepts from previous research regarding what makes a code of conduct effective. In short, we did not see an impact from our "intervention" of exposure and emphasis on an expectation of academic honesty using a code of conduct statement and a requirement that it be signed by students. In both semesters of the online courses regardless of utilization of a code of conduct statement in the winter term, the average midterm and final exam scores were significantly higher than in pre-pandemic, in-person, courses with proctored exams. This observation of above average exam scores in the Fall term inspired the study and suggested grade inflation for the midterm and final exam averages in the online courses possibly because of opportunities for cheating that arise in an unproctored online testing environment. Further, there was no notable difference in performance averages between the two online courses that had the differing conditions of no exposure or emphasis on the code of conduct and exposure and emphasis on the code of conduct. Additionally, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly at first glance, a secondary analysis did not reveal any significant differences in what might be considered inflated performance in the online sections of the course when looking at students who signed or did not sign the code of conduct statement. Upon further reflection, the authors of this article have considered that while it may have been an implicit bias to believe that those who did not sign it were planning to cheat to make the grade and were avoiding the cognitive dissonance associated with signing a pledge fully intending not to honor it, this may have been at best an oversimplification of what may have occurred. Perhaps students not signing the code of conduct was just a product of laziness or disorganization. Maybe poorer or less well-organized students or students who pay less attention to what is going on are the ones who did not sign. Subsequently, their marks are not different because they used the same methods to enhance performance as the other students.

There are several interesting possible explanations for what was observed in this study. While the intention of an honour code is to promote academic honesty this is not always the reality. It has been suggested that, as was the approach in this study, it is possible that exposure to a code of conduct through reminders may have an impact on cheating (Malesky et al., 2022).

However, that did not seem to bear out in this study if the observed performance differences between the in-person and online courses can be attributed to opportunities for cheating.

Instead, this study supported research that indicates that while having a code of conduct reduces incidences of cheating in institutions of higher education, this is impacted by several factors regarding how the institution approaches the communication of the code of conduct and the expectations surrounding it (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Roig & Marks, 2006). As noted by O'Neill and Pfeiffer (2012) "…for an honour code to invoke less cheating behaviour, the code must be well understood, respected, and strongly abided by on the part of both faculty and students" (pg. 234). This condition of a campus culture that promotes an honour code and academic integrity being integral to the effectiveness of an honour code is repeated in a multitude of other studies (Arnold et al., 2007; McCabe & Pavela, 2010; McCabe & Trevino, 1993; McCabe et al., 2001). The institution where this study took place does have a student code of conduct and an established policy for handling cases of academic dishonesty. However, it is not a pervasive part of the culture of the institution or uniformly distributed or communicated to the students. So, while the expectations of academic integrity were emphasized in the Winter 2021 course, the principles of academic integrity could not be considered a part of the larger campus culture, and as such perhaps this explains the lack of a significant impact of the robust use of the code of conduct in the course. Further, there is no requirement that other courses at the institution where the study took place implement a course-level emphasis on the code of conduct, thus making the experience of this for the students whose scores were used in this study a "one-off" type of experience and not an encounter with a full-blown campus culture of academic integrity as the expectation. There was no basis for these students, even the ones who signed the honour statement, to necessarily take this seriously. McCabe, Klebe Trevino, and Butterfield (2001a) state it best: "[a]n effective honor code must be more than mere window dressing; a truly effective code must be well implemented and strongly embedded in student culture" (pg. 224).

Continuing with a look toward how normative culture impacts the effectiveness of honour codes, it is relevant to look at the impact of peers on academic integrity and how the culture of the class likely played a role in the findings. This research was done by comparing online pandemic impacted courses with traditional in-person courses from semesters prior to the pandemic. One of the major changes to the culture of the campus and the classroom was lack of in-person peer interaction and decrease in peer interaction overall, even virtual. While, as discussed, campus culture impacts academic integrity, numerous studies indicate that the behaviour of peers is the most important factor when looking at context and influence for academic dishonesty. If students perceive that their peers are cheating or that cheating is acceptable and, in fact, necessary to perform on par, then there is a great likelihood that academic dishonesty will ensue (McCabe & Trevino, 1993; McCabe & Trevino, 1997; McCabe et al., 2001; O'Rourke, et. al. 2010; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009). Even with the use of honour codes, there is a responsibility that exists among students to communicate, embody, and maintain a classroom culture of academic integrity; this facilitates norms and supports social learning as discussed previously (Stogner et al. 2013). The interaction between peers that would have provided opportunities for dialogue and social learning to support a culture of academic integrity were not in place in the online, pandemic setting of this study. This blocking of dialogue between peers in the setting for this study can help us understand why there was no difference in the assessment averages from Fall 2020 to Winter 2021 and gives us insight as to why there was no difference in assessment averages between those who signed the honour statement and those who did not.

Bath and colleagues (2014) tell us that students' perceptions of whether others are cheating plays a significant role in the decision to cheat. We might assume from the observed spike in grades in the online courses compared to the pre-pandemic in-person courses that there may have existed among the students a perception that peers were cheating. This would have been in absence of in-person dialogue but could have been influenced by virtual communication means. During the pandemic at this institution, it became common for students to set up online Discord groups to interact with peers and study in groups. On at least one occasion, it was discovered that a large class was using Discord during a final exam. A very complicated academic dishonesty case was filed, and university procedure was followed to adjudicate the matter. This begs the question as to whether this was an isolated case in a particular course, or is it possible that this type of dialogue, social learning, and cultural norms that supported cheating were more widespread? As other researchers have found, it is possible that in our study, too, the perception that their peers were cheating outweighed mechanisms put in place to support academic integrity. The bottom line for students is that academics are competitive and those who have goals of continued education and graduate school, as would frequently be the case for students majoring in psychology, the pressure to do well in the face of perceiving that peers are cheating would be a significant pressure.

5.1 Conclusion and Future Directions

One the most widely studied topics in higher education is students' decisions to cheat. Many theories and interventions have evolved from these years of study including use and evaluation of code of conduct or honor statements. Over the years, code of conduct statements have undergone revisions and refinements to reflect the evolving educational landscape and societal expectations. These codes have been influenced by legal frameworks, accreditation requirements, and the growing emphasis on integrity and ethical practices in academic settings. They are now being influenced by a worldwide pandemic and its aftermath. Higher education has been changed by the pandemic in many ways. One of those ways pertains to course delivery. It is likely that colleges and universities will continue with more online courses as many students and faculty have embraced the flexibility of this type of course delivery. Considering this, educators need to know how to best promote academic integrity in this new landscape including the best ways to use code of conduct statements to support online learning that is valid and based on integrity. Institutions of higher education will benefit by recognizing the importance of proactively promoting academic integrity and responsible behavior among students in what is likely to be an inevitable increase in online learning.

While this study was an attempt to test the impact of implementing a code of conduct in a course, it was somewhat exploratory in nature, and as previously noted, has served to inspire reflection more than conclusions. However, there is value in knowing the limitations of an intervention as it can inform re-evaluation and revision to the approach with a goal of attempting to embed the current research in the existing body of knowledge and successfully utilize codes of conduct in online courses. One possible approach to achieving this goal is through the implementation of code of conduct statements tailored specifically for online students and delivered in ways that are more directly impactful in an online learning environment. In hindsight, adding several online discussions about the code of conduct and expectations regarding academic honesty in real time to the course curriculum may have yielded different results than communication about the code and expectations all through documents, announcements, and emails.

Also looking at future practices, honour codes can be introduced to students in a variety of ways. By incorporating code of conduct statements into course syllabi or student handbooks, educators can emphasize the importance of academic integrity at the onset of the academic journey and cultivate a culture of academic integrity; however, as noted, this will be more effective if approached as both a campus and a classroom culture goal that considers the dominant impact of peers. This study and the literature indicate that having a code of conduct as a central document in a classroom is not sufficient for inspiring academic honesty. While providing a code of conduct to students indicates that academic dishonesty is not sanctioned, it is students' attitudes toward cheating and peer-based norms that are paramount to a culture of academic integrity. To this point, online courses would benefit from supporting opportunities for students to connect virtually in as many ways as possible and to encourage dialogues about academic integrity with a class even when online. A code of conduct that is not embedded in the culture of the course or of the university is limited in its impact (McCabe et al., 2012). Further, a code of conduct that is not central in student dialogue nor serving to make transparent the norms regarding cheating among peers is limited in its usefulness. As is abundantly clear in the literature, the goals and ideas discussed here are not simple and straightforward and are complicated even more in online courses. But the principles of creating a culture of academic integrity can still be applied to an online learning environment. By widely sharing code of conduct statements and actively engaging students in discussions about academic integrity, educational institutions can create a culture of honesty and ethical behavior, preparing students for a successful and principled academic journey and professional career.

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Appendix A

Academic Misconduct Information Provided to Students

Academic Misconduct

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1. <u>Academic Misconduct</u>

Academic misconduct means any action taken by a student that gives the student an unearned advantage in matters affecting his/her academic standing. For professional programs, all actions that result in a breach of the rules of conduct as set out by the professional bodies and adopted in whole or in substance by the relevant professional program as part of its code of conduct shall also be considered acts of academic misconduct.

2. <u>Plagiarism</u>

Plagiarism is the act of copying, reproducing or paraphrasing significant portions of one's own work, or someone else's published or unpublished material (from any source, including the Internet), without proper acknowledgement, representing these as new or as one's own. Plagiarism applies to all intellectual endeavours, including the creation and presentation of music, drawings, designs, dance, photography and other artistic and technical works.

Students have the responsibility to learn and to use the conventions of documentation as accepted in their area of study and instructors have the responsibility of informing students in writing of any significant individual interpretations of plagiarism.

3. <u>Other Academic Misconduct</u>

Other forms of academic misconduct include: cheating, violating exam/test rules, impersonation, academic forgery or fraud, unauthorized collaboration, violating the University scholarship rules, furnishing false information, and tampering or resubmitting an exam/test.

Consequences:

If the instructor believes that academic misconduct has occurred, they should **assign a grade of IN** (incomplete) to the work in question and reports the case to the Department Head, to the Associate Dean of the Faculty, **and to the student(s) involved.** The Associate Dean of the Faculty is responsible for the adjudication of any alleged case of academic misconduct, including plagiarism, and to assign an appropriate sanction. (Common sanctions include admonition, letter of reflection, mark reduction, censure notation on transcript, suspension, expulsion, depending on the nature of the misconduct and whether it represents a first or subsequent offence.) Students have an automatic right of appeal to the Discipline Appeal Committee. A student wishing to exercise his/her right to appeal a finding of misconduct and/or sanction imposed shall initiate the appeal process within 10 working days of the decision having been issued. (See section 5.4 of <u>Bylaw 31</u>.)

<u>NOTE:</u> An instructor who suspects that a student has committed an act of academic misconduct should meet informally with the student to discuss the matter. At the meeting, the instructor may <u>dismiss the matter</u> and, if appropriate, offer a <u>teachable moment</u>. Should the instructor choose not to dismiss the matter, they will forward the matter to the Department Head. In cases where the student does not respond to the invitation or chooses not to meet with the instructor, the instructor will forward the matter to the Head with a note stating that attempts to meet with the student failed.

Teachable Moment means a learning opportunity for a student, whereby the instructor engages in an informal lesson or discussion with the student on the particular matter. This is done in lieu of filing a formal complaint.

Appendix B

Student Code of Conduct

1. Principles

The University is a community of scholars committed to the motto of: Goodness, Discipline, and Knowledge. As in any community, integrity is the foundation upon which all else is built. Fundamentally, a university is a place where those eager to learn gather to advance knowledge in an open, accepting and friendly manner with a goal to making important contributions to society.

• It is a place where freedom of expression is protected vigorously and uncompromisingly and where civility of expression in word and deed is the code of conduct.

• It is a place where all people are treated fairly without concern to religion, race, colour, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, disability or age.

As such, students are expected to commit to a code of behaviour that stresses respect for the dignity and individuality of all persons, and the rights and property of others. They are expected to practice personal and academic integrity, to take responsibility for their own personal and academic commitments, and to contribute to the University community to gain fair, cooperative and honest inquiry and learning. They are also expected to respect and strive to learn from differences in people, ideas, and opinions, and refrain from and discourage behaviours which threaten the freedom and respect that every individual deserves.

All students, student groups, and organizations have the responsibility to maintain a high standard of conduct based on these principles. It is important to understand that transgressing the code of behaviour or assisting others in a transgression are equally wrong. Students are expected to be individually responsible for their actions whether acting individually or in a group. All students should know that the Senate Bylaw on Academic Integrity (Bylaw 31) addresses this issue as it relates to academic misconduct and all students should be familiar with the content of this Bylaw. Further, students should know that non-academic misconduct is addressed under the purview of the Board.

2. This code applies to:

(a) conduct that occurs on the premises of the University or its federated and affiliated institutions; and
(b) conduct that occurs off-campus, when the student is conducting University activities:
i. the student is representing, or presenting him/herself as a representative of, the University or a student group/organization;
ii. the student's actions or behaviour have, or might reasonably be seen to have, a negative impact on the University or on the rights of a member of the University community to use and enjoy the University's learning and working environments.

3. Statement of Academic and non-Academic Rights and Responsibilities

A) Academic Rights and Responsibilities. All students of the University have the right to have their work judged accurately and fairly and have the responsibility to behave in a manner that ensures this. **E**xamples of behaviours that violate this code include, but are not limited to:

i. Plagiarism: the act of copying, reproducing or paraphrasing significant portions of one's own work, or someone else's published or unpublished material (from any source, including the internet), without proper acknowledgment, representing these as new or as one's own. Plagiarism applies to all intellectual endeavours: creation and presentation of music, drawings, designs, dance, photography and other artistic and technical works. (Students have the responsibility to learn and use the conventions of documentation as accepted in their area of study and instructors have the responsibility of informing students in writing of any significant individual interpretations of plagiarism.)

ii. Falsifying/altering, withholding or concocting medical records, compassionate documents, correspondence, academic documents, research results, references, sources. Forging or using University documents, records or instruments of identification with intent to defraud.

iii. Submitting false, fraudulent or purchased assignments, research or credentials. Taking or releasing, without permission, the ideas or data of others that were shared with the expectation that they were confidential.

iv. Impersonating another or permitting someone to impersonate you, either in person or electronically, for academic assessment or in order to improperly gain access to services.

v. Improperly obtaining, through theft, bribery, collusion or other means, access to confidential or privileged information, examination papers, or set of questions, or improperly distributing restricted material.

vi. Submitting the same work, research or assignment, or portions of the same course work, research or assignment, for credit on more than one occasion without the prior written permission of the instructor(s) in the course(s) involved.

vii. Taking part in unauthorized collaboration with another student, which may include working in a group, and submitting the same course work as one or more students in the course, unless expressly permitted by the instructor.

viii. Copying or using unauthorized aids, or, without permission, working or receiving assistance from another, for any evaluative procedure.

ix. Allowing another student to copy one's academic work when one knows or has reason to believe the other student will be submitting the work for evaluation.

x. Failing to take reasonable care, in the circumstances known to the student, to prevent one's material from being inappropriately copied.

xi. Altering, destroying, hiding or otherwise restricting access to academic materials intended for general use.

xii. Interfering with the scholarly activities of another in order to harass or gain unfair academic advantage. This includes falsifying, interfering or tampering with experimental data, with a human or animal subject, with a written or other creation (for example, a painting, sculpture, film), with a chemical used for scientific study or research, or with any other object of study.

xiii. Breach of the Senate Policy on the Conduct of Exams and Tests.

Appendix C

Honor Code Statement

I have read the Student Code of Conduct provided by my professor and posted on Blackboard on the course site in Resources. As a member of the University learning community and PSYC 1160, I understand and will abide by the University's Student Code of Conduct as outlined in the document that has been provided to me. I agree to the provisions of the University Student Code of Conduct, and I will not engage in, condone, or assist others in any act of dishonesty or plagiarism. I understand that I will be subject to appropriate disciplinary and/or academic sanctions if I commit any violations of the University's academic integrity policies. I will specifically refrain from the use of publisher test banks when completing my quizzes and exams. Further, I will not engage in unauthorized collaboration with another student or students when completing my quizzes, exams, and assignments.

Please write your signature (first and last name) below using your mouse or touchpad.

Appendix D

Examples of announcements posted on the course LMS system

The following announcement was posted on Feb. 25, which was the day of the midterm:

As you start your midterm today, please recall that you have been given the **Code of Conduct for the University** *and asked to sign this code.* **You are expected to engage in academic integrity in all matters**. *Among other things, the code specifies the following as violations of the Code:*

- *Impersonating another or permitting someone to impersonate you, either in person or electronically, for academic assessment or in order to improperly gain access to services.*
- *Taking part in unauthorized collaboration with another student, which may include working in a group, and submitting the same course work as one or more students in the course, unless expressly permitted by the instructor.*
- *Copying or using unauthorized aids, or, without permission, working or receiving assistance from another, for any evaluative procedure*

Should you violate these rules of conduct or engage in any act that violates the Senate Policy on the Conduct of Exams and Tests you may be subject to having a case of Academic Misconduct filed against you.

The following statement was posted and emailed on April 5 as part of a post about the final exam:
You are expected to abide by the Student Code of Conduct when taking this exam. The Student Code of Conduct is posted in Resources.

Appendix E

Statement at the top of the midterm and the final exam

"I have read the **Student Code of Conduct** provided by my professor and posted on Blackboard on the course site in Resources. As a member of the University learning community and PSYC 1160, I understand and will abide by the University's Student Code of Conduct as outlined in the document that has been provided to me. I agree to the provisions of the University Student Code of Conduct, and I will not engage in, condone, or assist others in any act of dishonesty or plagiarism. I understand that I will be subject to appropriate disciplinary and/or academic sanctions if I commit any violations of the University's academic integrity policies. I will specifically refrain from the use of publisher test banks when completing my quizzes and exams. Further, I will not engage in unauthorized collaboration with another student or students when completing my quizzes, exams, and assignments."

Appendix F

Announcement seeking consent of use of data for this study

Hello!

Congratulations on the completion of PSYC 1160. I enjoyed having you all in my class and getting to know you in the virtual classroom. I am about to embark on some research, and I need to get consent from you to use your data from PSYC 1150 and PSYC 1160. If you were in only one and not both courses with me, then that is fine. I still need your consent.

As we have been online this school year, this is a good time for me to do some research in this new and unique environment. I would like to do some comparisons of the average scores on the quizzes, midterms, final exams, major writing assignments, and marks for the course for PSYC 1150 and PSYC 1160. As you can see, I am looking at <u>average scores not individual scores,</u> so what I will be comparing and reporting in my research study will be what is called aggregate data. That means no one will be identified by name or score. There will not be any identifying information used for my study. I will be using the data that I have from the Blackboard grade centre, Resources, and my spreadsheets that I use to calculate your final course marks. I will not be using your student numbers or any identifying information. I will be reporting basic demographics. The only people who will have access to the data on Blackboard and on my spreadsheets will be myself and my graduate student who was a GA for this course.

If you do **NOT** want your scores included in the averages that will be calculated for the study, then please send an email by **April 30** so that your scores will not be used. You can email me, or you can email the GA.

You now have completed the course and can see all your scores on Blackboard so you know that I cannot change these and there is no risk of any retaliation should you tell me or the GA that you do not want to be in this study. Plus, I would never do that! This study will be submitted to the University Research Ethics Board for full approval.

Thanks, and have a great summer!